

Service-Learning and Standards: Putting an End to the Hysteria

by Evan Goldberg

In the early days of the standards movement, the Alameda County Office of Education gathered teachers together to engage in an exercise that connected content standards to school gardens. A group of elementary teachers worked in language arts, mathematics, science and social science teams. They chose to integrate the third grade standards with school garden activities.

After 45 minutes of work, it became apparent that the teachers needed to talk. "We're having problems," noted one teacher. "We're having problems finding standards that we CAN'T connect with school gardens."

This was my introduction to teachers' ease with integrating content standards and service activities. That afternoon, we came to agreement that curriculum integration was "just not that hard."

Teachers that had greater success with the curriculum integration process were teachers who thought more abstractly. These teachers more easily saw the connections between subject disciplines, school and the community. Not surprisingly, these were the teachers who were attracted to and motivated to use service-learning. To a degree, it was a self-selecting group.

Over the years, teachers' ease with curriculum integration has been confirmed again and again.

On one occasion, we were meeting with our teachers and preaching on the importance of beginning with the content standards. "Begin with the standards," I would exhort. "Then find the service." The teachers corrected me. "No, no, no. We need to start with the service. It's important that we're engaged in compelling service. We need to be doing something exciting. Don't worry, we'll connect the standards." And the teachers were right.

One extreme example was a teacher who developed a service-learning lesson that integrated over twenty different content standards. We teased her throughout the year for her "over-exuberance."

The clinching evidence took place in a course we taught for school administrators. At random, I distributed grade-level language arts, science, mathematics and social science standards. In elementary, middle and high school groups, I assigned each group a generic service-learning project: cross-aged reading, recycling, food drives.

I challenged each group to integrate as many standards with their service-learning project, as possible. I gave them five minutes. The contest began.

When I rang the final bell, I surveyed the administrators regarding the number of content standards that they were able to integrate with their service activity. From twenty participants, NO participant was unable to connect a standard with service. Approximately five said they

were able to integrate between 1-5 standards. The majority connected between 5-10 standards. A few overachievers connected between 10-20 standards. One person connected nearly 30 standards.

I concluded: "What you have clearly demonstrated is that within five minutes NO person was unable to find a standard that worked with service. Most of you connected between 5-10. Some of you found even more. You did all of this in five minutes. Can your teachers connect content standards with service? Give them five minutes."

The administrators looked at me with a new understanding. There was no need for additional discussion.

This doesn't mean that correlating standards with service is the entire story. Standards must be both taught thoughtfully and assessed thoroughly. There are different levels of curriculum integration. There are standards that "connect or bridge" with service and standards that more authentically are integrated with the service. There is more work to be done in distinguishing between the quality of "the fit" between the service and the learning.

But let's be clear with our teachers, administrators and community. Service-learning is NOT a distraction from content standards. It's a great way of teaching them.